

Testimony Supporting SB-63
By Stafanie Chambers, PhD
February 25, 2010

Legislators:

My name is Stefanie Chambers and I write **in support of SB-63**, a bill to mandate paid sick time for Connecticut employees.

I am a professor of political science at Trinity College. One of my areas of expertise is race, ethnicity and gender in American government. Throughout my research and teaching I have become acutely aware of the problems faced by the working poor who do not have access to paid sick days from their employers. It is estimated that over 22 million American working women have no sick days. Because women remain the primary care givers for their children in most households, missing work to care for a sick child can create severe economic hardship for a family. But this issue is not only relevant to working women. Studies indicate that approximately 600,000 workers in our state lack paid sick time. In these difficult economic times, workers must decide between time off and their economic security. Unfortunately, the choice to work when ill hurts employees as well as their employers. Working when ill puts others at risk of illness. Especially in the case of food service employees, the spread of illness to customers is highly problematic. In addition, employers who do not provide paid sick time run the risk of lower employee productivity and the need for added training due to higher employee turnover. The bottom line is that businesses do pay a price when they do not pay employees for a few sick days a year. Beyond the financial implications business face, the health risks and burden the current policy places on working families is unconscionable.

Connecticut has the opportunity to lead the nation in mandating paid sick time for employees. The United States is one of the few industrialized nations not to mandate paid sick time. Just as our state led the nation with our Family Medical Leave Act, we have the potential to do the same with this legislation. I urge you to support this bill.

Stefanie Chambers, Ph.D.

Attached:

Excerpt from **Testimony before the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women**
Women's Day

February 9, 2010

By Stafanie Chambers, PhD

...A great deal of emphasis has been placed on the position of men in today's "Great Recession." Seventy-eight percent of job losses have occurred in male-dominated fields such as manufacturing and construction. At the same time that these traditional men's professions have taken a hit, women's

traditional fields such as health and education have been somewhat immune from this downturn. However, receiving less publicity is the fact that many other traditional women's professions such as retail, hospitality, and personal business services have experienced much the same downward trend as the manufacturing and construction industries. The emphasis on the recession as it relates to men tells only a portion of the story. It is vital that we also understand how the recession has affected women if we hope to develop broad solutions to the economic situation we find ourselves in today.

My comments today focus on the impact of the recession on women, and by extension, their families. The picture I present demonstrates the similarities between men and women in these challenging economic times. At the same time that all Americans have been touched by the recent downturn, I would argue that many of the structural barriers women face in our society exacerbate the problems faced by women economically and place all families at risk. We must expose these structural inequalities and search for solutions that lead to substantive change. Along these lines, I will offer a few recommendations aimed at achieving gender equality in employment and society more broadly.

Women have made significant contributions to our country's economy through their labor participation even before WWII when women entered the workforce in large numbers to replace men at war. Indeed, just last week the Institute for Women's Policy Research released a report about the effects of the recession on women's and men's unemployment. The report includes a summary of US Department of Labor Statistics from 1950 through 2009 illustrating that women's labor force participation has risen at about the same rate that men's participation has fallen. Today, 72% of men are part of the labor force compared to 60% of women. In 1950 the figures were about 86.5% for men and 34% for women. The steady increase among working women during this roughly 60 year period is attributable to many factors such as federal and state policies intended to equalize employment opportunities for women, expanding women's access to higher education, access to birth control, and the steady growth of service sector jobs. During this same time we have also made progress in terms of narrowing the wage gap between men and women. Yet, women still make 77 cents to every dollar earned by men. Much of this is attributable to the fact that jobs traditionally held by women (pink collar jobs) are largely undervalued in our economic system. African-American women earned just 70 cents for every dollar earned by men in 2007 and Latinas earned just 62 cents for every dollar men earned. Furthermore, even though women have been entering the workforce in large numbers, women have lost 2 million jobs in the recent recession, the same number as men in the previous recession. In other words, women's jobs are not immune from this recent downturn.

In September the *New York Times* ran a story about the growing number of women in the workforce as a direct result of the decline in employed men. The article demonstrates that this trend does not represent a step forward for women, but rather evidence of employers demand for cheap labor. Women in the labor market are more likely to be in part-time or contract positions and employed in sectors where job security is fragile. For employers looking for the best deal, hiring women for part-time or contract work can result in significant savings in pay and benefits packages. For women, low wages, limited hours or non-existent job security have long-term impact on their financial stability.

Women also face increasing hardship supporting their families. Family income reliance is shifting from dual earners to women as sole earners as more men fall out of the labor force. Because women often make less than their male partners, it means that women are no better positioned now compared to when their husbands were employed, to become sole breadwinners for their families. Like the Great Depression

and WWII eras, more and more homemakers are being forced into the workforce. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, more than 2.1 million wives whose husbands are unemployed are supporting their families. This finding is particularly troubling because research indicates that women's earnings fall 10% each year they are out of the workforce, putting women who reenter the workforce in a very unfortunate position. In households headed by women, unemployment rates exceed 30%. To make matters worse, many women feel the added burden of finding affordable childcare if they are to reenter the workforce. The cost of care can be very high, and requires a significant share of a family's monthly earnings –most families in Connecticut spend 30% to 40% of their income on childcare. In addition, women who manage to secure full-time employment and qualify for employer subsidized health care for their families find it difficult to afford the employer contribution because their pay is low.

Women make up 51% of the population and nearly 50% of the workforce, their economic security as we come out of this recession is critical to the growth and development of the state and this country.

Recommendations

My list of working recommendations represent an overview of the comprehensive areas that need to be assessed and are intended to raise awareness of women's economic vulnerability during these recessionary times. These recommendations are not listed in order of importance.

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6) Family Leave / Paid Sick Days: The State of Connecticut was the first state to enact a Family Medical Leave law, even before those benefits were expanded to all Americans in 1993 through the federal Family Medical Leave Act. The major omission from the federal law is that while employees may take a leave of absence for a number of medical reasons without fear of losing their job, employers are not mandated to pay employees during their leave. Particularly for poor and middle class families, taking three months off work without pay is unthinkable because their families live from paycheck to paycheck. While it is difficult to imagine finding ways to subsidize family leave during these challenging economic times, we must consider the hardship experienced particularly by new parents today and develop ideas aimed at supporting families during life changing transitions. One small step for consideration should be a paid sick day policy for all Connecticut businesses.

